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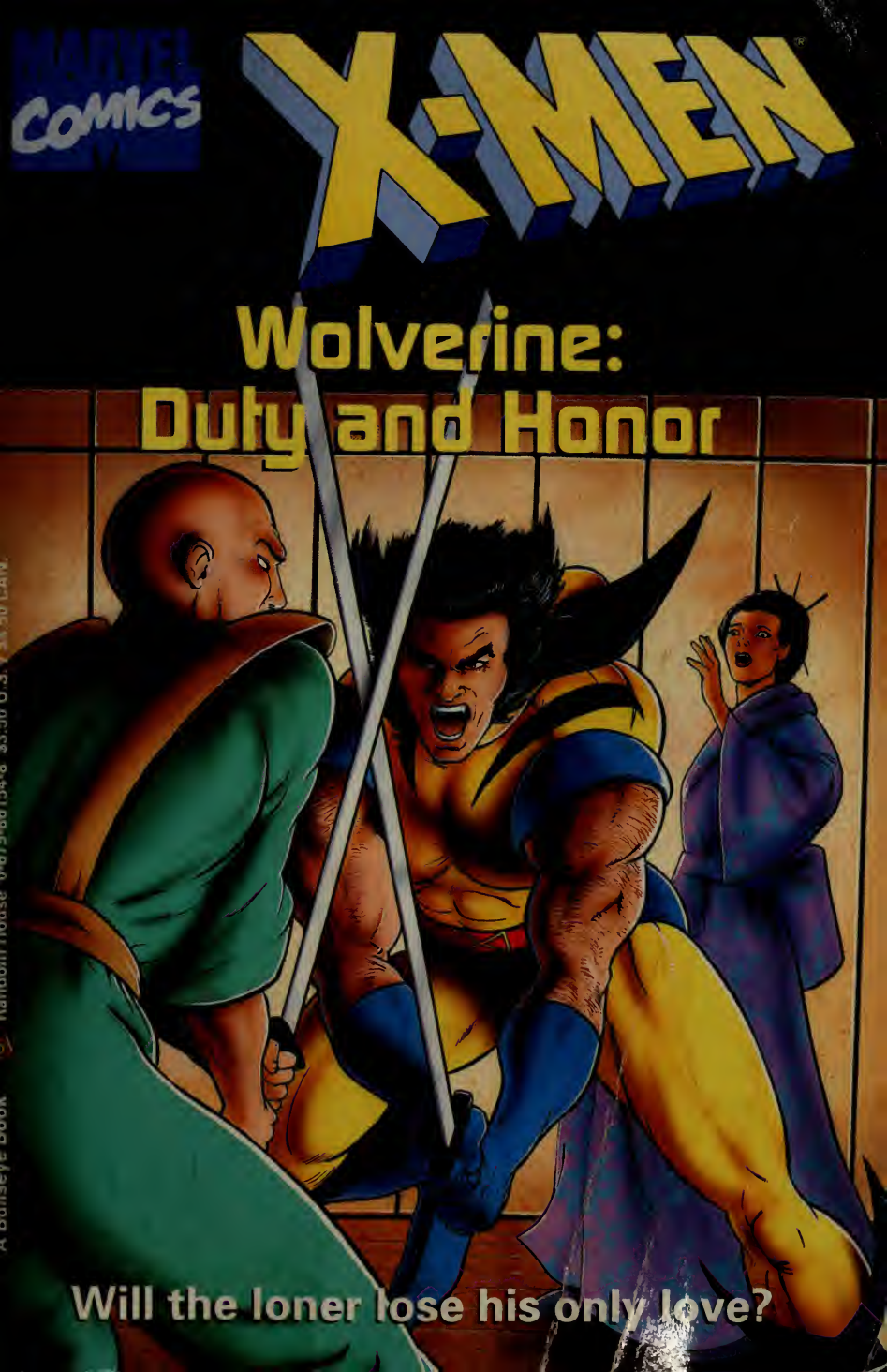
Wolverine: Duty and Honor



Will the loner lose his only love?

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"You would like to claim my daughter's hand in marriage. Your arrogance is beyond belief. Our family is as noble as it is old."

Mariko kneeled in front of him. "Father, please," she pleaded. "I beg you."

"Be silent, child," he said, without giving her a glance. His eyes were locked on Logan's. "She thinks the world of you, Wolverine. Let us see you prove your worth. Face an old man in combat!" Shingen picked up a wooden sword and tossed another to Wolverine.

"Why are we using *bokan?*" said Wolverine. "These are only practice swords. Why not the real thing?"

"To be frank," said Shingen, rising in one graceful motion, "you are not worthy of a true sword."

Wolverine: Duty and Honor

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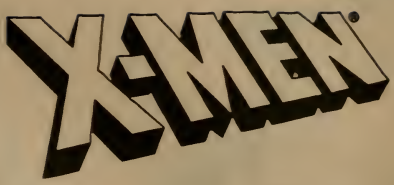


Wolverine: Duty and Honor

CHAPTER 1

Present and Past

It was a cold night in the Canadian woods. Wolverine held his hands in front of the fire to warm up. But it wouldn't work. Nothing would work. He was cold to the bone. The adamantium-laced bone.

You might call him crazy. Many do. You'd think he'd freeze to death, camping in the dead of winter. But he wasn't freezing. He was a mutant. His healing factor kicked in whenever he was under the weather—even when the weather was 30 below.

And what about wild animals? Sure, they were hungry this time of year. Dangerous. Ready to pounce on anything that moves. That was how Wolverine liked 'em. They reminded him of himself. They were all hunters. But *his* claws were made of adamantium, and his bones were reinforced with it. And adamantium is stronger than bone. Stronger than steel. With his claws and adamantium-strengthened frame to protect him, he was tougher than just about anything.

Just about.

So what was he doing in the middle of nowhere?

He was on leave from the X-Men. You might call it a vacation, although *he* wouldn't. He had a lot on his mind.

It was Professor Xavier, in fact, who suggested that Wolverine take some time off. Get away. It didn't have to be said twice. Wolverine got away. To the woods. Where he was comfortable. At home.

But he couldn't get away from himself. It was cold. So cold. For a minute he forgot what

he was doing. But it didn't last.

It hit him like a gust of wind, full in the face. The pain. The sorrow. The loss. He was here to forget.

Mariko.

He had thought the cold air would clear his head. Instead, it froze the past in place.

And the place was Japan.

Where he lost the one woman he had truly loved with all his heart. Mariko Yashida.

Wolverine tossed more sticks on the fire. The flames danced. He moved closer and stared into the brightness. Time stood still. Mariko's face flickered in the light. It was the face of an innocent young Japanese woman. The way she was when they first met.

"Ah, darlin'," he said. "I remember it so well..."

Wolverine was in Japan with the X-Men. He'd been there before, back when he was doing intelligence work for the Canadian government. He had always joked that the job didn't take much intelligence. That all he did was

follow orders. But the paychecks kept coming. And he got to travel.

Japan. The language. The customs. The food. He loved everything about the place. But what appealed to him most were the ways of the samurai, the hereditary warrior class of Japan.

To be a samurai is to be disciplined. Controlled. Qualities he'd never been known for. But Wolverine was young, and the ways of the samurai impressed him like nothing he'd ever seen or known before. For a few minutes he even imagined himself someday *being* one. Mastering that mindset.

Wishful thinking, he told himself.

Returning to Japan this time—as an X-Man—he knew better. He was who and what he was. Nothing more. Nothing less.

The team had just finished a mission in the Savage Land and was supposed to be resting up in Tokyo. Problem was, Wolverine couldn't rest. Culture shock.

I should have stayed in the Savage Land, he said to himself as he walked around the

city. He had no use for civilization. The rules. People. Problems. He wanted to cut loose. But he always had to hold back.

He had returned to Sunfire's house. Sunfire, whose real name was Shiro Yashida, was an X-Man from Japan. The team was staying at his family's ancestral home.

The "home" was a tall mansion, built like a fortress on the outside. Inside, the rooms were big and airy, with sliding doors made from bamboo, rice paper walls, and a minimal amount of furniture. Behind it was a traditional Japanese garden. Wolverine couldn't help but like the place.

He walked into the garden. It was peaceful and quiet. A small pond rippled with brightly colored koi carp. Everything was in perfect order. But his mind was still in turmoil. He couldn't stop thinking. About the way he'd felt in the Savage Land, the way he felt here, now...and how different that was from the way he had felt about Japan when he was young.

And then he saw a woman. The vision of a

woman, sitting under a tree. Meditating.

His first reaction was to flee. Instead, he stepped into the shadows. There was something about her. Something special. He just wanted to stay and watch her. But she knew he was there

She turned.

"Who is it?" she called.

Wolverine stepped forward, his face still in the shadows.

"Who are you?" she asked, her voice trying to hide its trembling. "What do you want?"

"Don't be frightened," said Wolverine in Japanese. He moved into the sunlight. "Please...I mean you no harm," he continued. "I thought the garden was empty. I like gardens and their solitude. I'm sorry I scared you. I'll go."

He turned to leave.

"Oh, no, please stay," said the woman, motioning for him to sit. "The fault is mine. I am only a girl. I haven't the courage of my cousin Shiro."

He sat beside her.

"You speak very well for an American," she said.

Wolverine told her about the time he'd once spent in her country "But I'm not an American," he added. "I'm Canadian. I'm one of the X-Men."

The woman smiled. "Shiro has spoken often of you with respect."

That's a relief, Wolverine thought to himself. He knew how important respect was in the Japanese culture.

"I am Mariko," she said shyly. She was wearing a traditional Japanese robe, a kimono. And her dark hair, in a loose bun, framed her face. *Man,* he thought. *She's beautiful.*

His voice softened. "I'm called Wolverine."

Mariko gave a sweet laugh. "Wolverine," she said, testing out the strange word. "That is really your name?"

The X-Man smiled. It was the first time he had in a long while. It felt good. Great. He found himself thinking he could get used to smiling...at Mariko, at least.

"No," he said. "Not between friends. My

real name is..."

His *real* name? Even the X-Men didn't know it back then. He took a breath and continued. "My name is—"

He stopped talking. His super-sharp hearing picked up a rumbling noise. A second later, the earth began to shake. The ground buckled.

"Cripes! What's happening?" he shouted.

"Preserve us—it is an earthquake!" cried Mariko.

The ground split open. A huge crack in the earth separated them. Trees came crashing down.

Wolverine reached across the gap and grabbed Mariko. He held her under one arm, and with the other batted away trees and crumbling walls.

"Hold on, Mariko! I'll get you out of here!" The ground was jumping every which way. It was like running across a floor covered with marbles.

Wolverine shielded the woman as best he could, using his claws to cut through the falling and flying objects. Finally, they were

safe and standing on solid ground with the rest of the X-Men. Storm, Cyclops, Nightcrawler, Sunfire, and the others had also made it safely out of the house. But the place was in shambles.

"I'll be curious to learn what that quake registered on the Richter scale," said Cyclops.

Storm shook her head. "That was no *ordinary* earthquake," she said.

The X-Men soon learned that the violent disturbance had been orchestrated by the evil mutant Moses Magnum. He had staged the quake as a demonstration of his power. Magnum threatened to sink all the islands of Japan if he wasn't made ruler of the nation within 24 hours. The X-Men's brief vacation was over.

Magnum's Mandroids—his half-man, half-robot fighter force—paid a visit to the Yashida home. Somehow they had found out where the X-Men were staying. The X-Men battled the Mandroids with their usual enthusiasm—all, that is, except Wolverine. He went *insane.* The memory of Mariko being ripped away

from him in the garden during the earthquake fed his fury. He went berserk, giving the fight to finish Magnum everything he had.

The Mandroids were destroyed. And soon, so was Magnum.

And then it was time to go home. Japan had only been, after all, a layover. Wolverine had known that from the start. And part of him was glad to be going home. But a big part of him wasn't.

Mariko. He hadn't seen her since the quake. Although he'd thought of her. Often.

Sunfire came to the airport to say goodbye. He'd decided to stay in Japan. Wolverine spotted Sunfire's limo parked just outside the airport gate, and on a hunch, made a quick visit to the airport flower stand. Then, in a flash, he was tapping at the limo's tinted window.

The dark glass rolled down. And there was Mariko.

Wolverine smiled, and held out his hand.

"A white chrysanthemum?" she said. "What is this for?"

"A gift, little one. From a friend." He leaned in closer. "Something to remember him by."

Mariko bowed her head. "It is very beautiful, Wolverine, and so are you.

He stood, speechless.

"*Wolverine!*" Cyclops shouted from the nearby airstrip. "*Come on!*"

Wolverine raised his hand in farewell. "Be seeing you," he said. He turned to walk away, but suddenly stopped and turned around.

"Mariko-chan," he said, "my name is Logan."

CHAPTER 2

Doubts and Discipline

Time passed. Life went on. There were missions. Late nights. Long stretches by his lonesome. But Wolverine couldn't stop thinking about Mariko.

He took to wandering around New York City's run-down sections. They made him comfortable. Down and dirty streets where he could roam wild. And think.

About Mariko.

Where did he get off falling for a lady like Mariko Yashida? Wolverine stopped in his

tracks. Was that it? Had he really fallen for her? Was he in love?

Nah, he told himself. *Impossible. That kind of sappy stuff ain't for you, bub.*

He got in the car to head back home. More than a few people stared as he cruised up Park Avenue. They say New Yorkers have seen everything, but they weren't used to seeing the likes of Wolverine behind the wheel of Professor Xavier's Rolls-Royce.

But suddenly he saw something that left *him* staring. He couldn't believe it. It was Mariko. Walking down the street!

Wolverine left the Rolls where it was and took off after her. Horns blasted. People cursed. He didn't care. He had to catch up with her. What was she doing here?

"Mariko!" he called. "Wait, Mariko!"

She disappeared inside a building. A man in a suit closed the door behind her.

"Wait a minute!" he said as he stuck his foot in the door. He began to speak in Japanese. "I'm Logan. I'm a friend of Mari—I mean, Miss Yashida's. Could I see her? Please!"

The man looked at him and said politely, "I am sorry, Mr. Logan. But Miss Yashida is not to be disturbed." Then he closed the door in his face.

Okay, bub, Wolverine thought to himself. *That's the way you want it? I'm going. But I'll be back. Soon.*

And he was back. Again and again. He kept knocking at that same door. And little by little, he found out what was going on. The building was the Japanese consulate. Mariko was visiting New York, and staying there. But she could've been staying in Fort Knox for all Wolverine saw of her. Security was very tight. But one day, when he appeared at the door, he struck gold. Mariko had left a note for him.

"Logan-san," it read, "please do me the great honor of dining with me tonight at the consulate."

At last! Wolverine rushed back to the mansion, as excited as a kid on a first date. He showered, put on a suit, and tried to get his thoughts together.

"This is just dinner with a lady friend," he told himself on his way into the city. "That's all." He'd had dinner with women before. Plenty of them. This wouldn't be anything different.

But that night *was* different. Mariko was incredible. She was sweet and shy and lovely, but with so much on the ball. She was no shrinking violet. At least, not once she got to know someone.

"Thank you for dinner, Mariko," Wolverine said. "I can't remember when I've enjoyed a meal more." He was so well-mannered, he surprised himself.

She grasped both his hands in hers. "I am glad, Logan-san."

He asked if he could see her again. "Yes," she said. "I hope soon!"

Wolverine walked down the street feeling like the luckiest man on earth.

He saw Mariko every night after that. And the more he saw her, the more he wanted to see her. She was like no other woman he'd known. She reached parts of his head that he

never knew existed.

Bit by bit, Mariko told him her history. She was the only daughter of one of the noblest, richest, most powerful families in Japan. She could trace her roots back two thousand years. Although Wolverine knew almost nothing about his background, they did have one thing in common. Neither of them knew their fathers. Mariko's had died when she was a little girl. And Wolverine's was a mystery. It was something that had always made him feel slightly alone in the world. But now, with Mariko, he didn't feel like an outsider. For the first time in his life he felt connected to something. To somebody.

But Wolverine couldn't stop his nagging doubts. *So what's next?* he wondered. Living day by day was okay before he met Mariko. But not now. She brought out a whole new side to him. With her, he was gentle. Kind. Loving. But underneath, he knew he was still the same old berserker, ready to lash out at a moment's notice. He hoped Mariko could understand.

Christmas was just around the corner, and

Professor Xavier was throwing a party on Christmas Eve. It seemed to Wolverine the perfect time to bring Mariko to the mansion. To let her see how he lived.

He picked her up at the consulate and drove her to the mansion. They hadn't even taken off their coats when Nightcrawler came running over.

"Mariko!" he said, holding some mistletoe over her head. "Long time no see. And you look as beautiful as ever."

Nightcrawler leaned in close to kiss her. He was just kidding around. He knew it. Mariko knew it. Everyone knew it. Except Wolverine.

Snikt!

"Back off," he growled. "The lady is with *me*."

Wolverine took a swipe at his friend without even thinking. *Bamf!* Nightcrawler teleported himself to the other end of the room. Wolverine had barely missed him.

But he wasn't about to miss twice. This time Wolverine lunged forward. Colossus, thinking quickly, grabbed him and lifted him

BAMF

clear off the ground.

"Let go of me, you tin-plated lummox!" Wolverine cried.

"Wolverine! Sheathe your claws," ordered the Professor. "Kurt meant no harm. You know that. His was an innocent Christmas greeting, not some enemy's attack!"

Wolverine's rage ended as quickly as it had begun. He felt a steadying hand on his arm. It was Mariko's. "Much obliged," he said to the Professor. "I'm calm now."

He turned to Nightcrawler. "Kurt," he said, "I'm sorry. I lost my head. I guess old habits die hard. Mine are a killer's instincts. Always have been. Always will be."

Wolverine had thought, *hoped* he was changing. Getting some discipline. Control. But he was wrong. Holiday cheer wasn't in the cards for him. He left the party. *It's better that I'm alone,* he thought. Better for everyone. Especially Mariko.

Outside, the air was cool and fresh. Wolverine listened to the noise from inside. People laughing. Having fun. Then he heard

footsteps. He knew without looking that it was Mariko.

They walked together for a while, saying nothing. And then they began to talk. Mariko didn't care about his temper. She understood he was trying to change. That sometimes he would fail. It began to snow, and suddenly the world looked clean and new.

And Wolverine was definitely in love.

He wanted to be with Mariko all the time. Wanted to block out everything else in the world.

Of course, he couldn't.

Wolverine might have been a lovesick fool, but he was also an X-Man. Duty called. He had to go to Canada. Seemed there was a crazed grizzly doing some serious damage up there. They needed an expert tracker. And nobody could track like Wolverine.

Much as he hated to, he left Mariko and set his mind on business.

He picked up the bear's trail his first morning out and followed it all day long. At night,

by the campfire, he wrote to Mariko. Day after day, he'd follow the same routine. Tracking, hunting when it was light. Writing long, rambling letters at night.

He poured out his soul in those letters. Telling Mariko how he felt about her. How he felt about everything. How he couldn't wait to come home to her.

The hunt took longer than he expected. The bear really *was* crazy. He'd been wounded. Hurt bad by a poisoned arrow. When Wolverine found him he put him out of his misery. Quickly. His job was done.

It was time to wash off the dirt and get ready to see his lady. First stop, the mansion and a hot shower. But he didn't get past the front hallway.

There was a stack of letters on the table. *His* letters to Mariko. They'd been returned unopened. Wolverine felt his guts slide down to his toes. What had happened?

CHAPTER 3

Swords and Surprises

Wolverine phoned the consulate. "Miss Yashida has been summoned back to Japan," he was told.

He dialed again. This time, long distance to the Yashida family home, outside Tokyo. Whoever answered hung up. Bad move.

There was a plane to Tokyo leaving the next morning. Wolverine was on it.

The flight was endless. He couldn't sleep. Couldn't think straight. Something was going on. Could Mariko be in danger? Sick? He had

to know. Had to see her.

The Tokyo airport was busy, so Wolverine tried to skip the formalities and give Immigration the slip. Go straight to Mariko. But the local spooks had other ideas. They knew about him from his secret agent days and had heard he was in town. He got nailed at the gate.

It could've been worse. The guy who stopped him was a friend. A good friend. Asano Kimura, one of the Japanese government's top people. They'd run some missions together in the past. Each had saved the other's hide more than once. Still, Wolverine wasn't thrilled to have his business slowed down.

Asano insisted on escorting him to his hotel room. Skyscraper lights glittered outside the window of the tastefully decorated suite. But Wolverine was interested in only one thing. He picked up the phone and called the Yashida home.

"I am Logan, a close friend of Lady Mariko's. May I please speak with her?" Click. Hung up on. Again. It was getting to be a habit

he didn't like.

"I'm being stonewalled."

"Of course, Logan," said Asano. "You are more truly Japanese than any Westerner I know. But I doubt even *you* can understand Mariko's actions." He poured two cups of strong tea and handed one to Wolverine. "You must remember. She is heir to a tradition of duty and honor. It is as old as Japanese civilization itself."

"Is she in trouble?" said Wolverine.

"If she is, old friend, she is beyond your help. She is married."

Married? Wolverine felt like he had been hit by a truck. Asano was still talking. But Wolverine's head was spinning. He caught something about Mariko's father. *But wasn't he dead?* Wolverine clenched his fist and forced himself to listen.

"...and he came back," Asano was saying. "He *wasn't* dead—just missing. And he's reclaimed his rightful place as head of the Yashida clan. But while he was gone, he gained

a great obligation. And the payment was Mariko's hand in marriage."

Wolverine's fist smashed into a lamp. "And she agreed? Just like that? *She loves me!*"

Asano was calm. "So? We speak of *giri*, Logan. Obligation. Duty. Honor. Mariko cannot deny that. She would rather die."

The X-Man reached for his knapsack and pulled out his Wolverine suit. "I can't live without her. I've got to see her."

"Respect her silence, Logan. Leave her be. If she does love you, this marriage has broken her heart. You will only make things worse."

Asano was trying to be reasonable. He should have known better.

Wolverine was dressed and out the door before Asano finished talking. "This is something I have to do," he said.

"Logan, forgive me," said Asano in his cool, calm way. "Should you step outside the law, I cannot help. Indeed, I may be forced to hunt you down."

"You're welcome to try," growled Wolverine.

* *

It was midnight. Wolverine was outside the Yashida family estate. The house stood like a tower, stretching up to the sky. Dogs guarded the entrance. Growling, they slinked up to greet him. Wolverine snarled back at them. They were mean. But they weren't stupid. They let him pass.

It was quiet. Too quiet.

He scaled the wall with an uneasy feeling, and slid open the first window he came to. The place was clean. No traps? No security? Something was up.

He went around back to the garden. He had a feeling. If Mariko was here, that's where she'd be. He was right.

Her small body was hunched over in the shadows. He couldn't see her face. "Mariko..." he whispered.

"Logan?" Mariko sounded surprised and exhausted. "You have come at last. But now it is too late."

"I was away. I came as soon as I heard, Mariko-chan."

"Do not call me that. You have not the right. I am married. What was once between us is no more." She hid her face in her kimono sleeve.

"I won't accept that," Wolverine said, moving close to her. He wanted to comfort her. To tell her it would all work out. "At least look at me. Face me. *Please.*"

She turned her face to the moonlight. Her eye was blackened. Her face bruised.

"Go," she said. "Go before you shame me further."

"*Who did this?*" he cried, his claws about to explode through his skin. But Mariko grasped his fist. *Her touch.* His claws stayed put.

Wolverine took her hand tightly in his. "Come with me. I love you."

"And I you," she said. "But I cannot. I am bound by far more important obligations."

Then Mariko led him inside. She showed him two ancient swords hanging on a wall.

"These swords were forged over eight hundred years ago for my clan. They are the soul of my family. They are as strong—and

deadly—as they were when they were new. And all that the Yashida clan was, is, and is yet to be, is represented by these swords.

"It is a family tradition of duty and honor.

"My commitment to you was made when I was free. My father's return has changed that."

Wolverine couldn't leave it alone. "You're not a piece of property," he said. "*You're a human being!*"

Mariko touched the ancient swords. "My father, in honor, gave his word. And I am bound to stand by it. If you cannot understand this, Logan, you do not know me—or Japan—at all."

Before Wolverine could answer, he picked up a scent. A new one. One he would never forget. The scent of Mariko's husband, Noburu. The X-Man stepped back into the shadows as Noburu entered the room.

"Mariko! What are you doing here? *Have you defied me again?*" Noburu's voice was like nails on a blackboard. He raised his hand to strike his wife.

Wolverine could stay hidden no longer.

His claws came out—*snikt!*—and he went for him. "Bub, you just signed your death warrant," he said, lifting him off the ground.

"*Logan, no!*" cried Mariko. "For the love you bear me, do not harm him."

He listened. His claws retracted. Noburu dropped to the ground.

Mariko knew Wolverine could deny her nothing. Not even the life of a man he hated.

There was a flight leaving for New York in the morning. He'd be on it.

Wolverine had turned to walk out of the room, and out of Mariko's life, when all at once, sharp little daggers came flying at him. *Shuriken*—metal throwing stars. Tipped with poison. Not even his healing factor could counteract the poison. He fell like a tower of cinder blocks.

CHAPTER 4

Duel and Dishonor

Wolverine opened his eyes and saw a giant pair of naked feet. When the room stopped spinning, he realized he was on the floor. He raised himself up and scanned the room. The feet were attached to a sumo wrestler. *He shouldn't be any problem,* thought Wolverine.

Noburu was nearby, sitting with Mariko. *No problem there, either,* thought the X-Man. He was dying to get his hands on *him.* But a man was seated between the two. He was older. But there was something in his eyes. A look of pure

steel. Wolverine felt certain he knew who the man was.

"Good evening, Mr. Logan," the older man said. "I am pleased to meet you. I am—"

"I know who you are," Wolverine cut in. "Lord Shingen. Lord of the manor. Lord of clan Yashida. Mariko's father."

He was stalling. Wolverine didn't want to start anything with Mariko there. And Shingen knew it.

"You would like to claim my daughter's hand in marriage. Your arrogance is beyond belief. Our family is as noble as it is old."

Mariko kneeled in front of him. "Father, please," she pleaded. "I beg you."

"Be silent, child," he said, without giving her a glance. His eyes were locked on Logan's. "She thinks the world of you, Wolverine. Let us see you prove your worth. Face an old man in combat!" Shingen picked up a wooden sword and tossed another to Wolverine.

"Why are we using *bokan?*" said Wolverine. "These are only practice swords. Why not the real thing?"

"To be frank," said Shingen, rising in one graceful motion, "you are not worthy of a true sword."

The old man went into position. He waited for Logan to make the first move. Mariko took a step to come between them. But something stopped her. Respect for her father. Duty. Honor.

Wolverine swung his sword with both hands. Hard. But Shingen blocked the swing with his own blade. Wolverine whipped it to his other side. *Crack!* Again, Shingen's sword was already there.

Shingen was old, but in good shape. Wolverine wasn't. The poison was dulling his reflexes. He'd thought it would only even the odds. It did more than that. Shingen was a master swordsman. And Logan hadn't touched a sword in years.

Suddenly, Shingen went on the offensive and kicked Wolverine in the gut. Wolverine was surprised. Thrown off balance. Shingen pressed his advantage. With a sure hand, he struck. A direct hit between the X-Man's shoul-

der and neck. The kind of blow that would kill a normal man.

But Wolverine was far from normal.

A second later, Shingen struck again, another almost lethal blow. He was fighting dirty. *Honor and duty, my foot,* thought Wolverine. This was no friendly little duel.

Snikt! Out popped his claws.

Mariko gasped.

Too late, Wolverine realized Shingen's plan. He'd *wanted* Wolverine to get mad. So mad, he would fight for real. Mariko thought the battle was meant to embarrass Logan. She didn't know her father was out for blood. As far as she could tell, Wolverine was losing, and unhappy about it. He'd turned their "mock" battle into the real thing. He'd lost control.

And in Mariko's eyes, he'd lost his honor.

Shingen attacked once more. But Wolverine's heart wasn't in it now. He couldn't concentrate. An instant later, he lay flat on the ground. Shingen was above him, ready to put the finishing touch on his handiwork: a broken Wolverine.

"Behold, daughter," Shingen bellowed. "Here is the man you claim to love. Yet he is no man at all. He is an animal cast in human form. See his true nature, Mariko. His true self. This *thing* you gave your heart to. Answer me: *Is he worthy of such a prize?*"

As if through a mist, Wolverine saw Mariko's face as she answered. "No."

Then the mist covered everything, and he blacked out.

Neon lights flashed in the distance, reflecting off the garbage cans that surrounded him. *Great,* thought Wolverine as he struggled to clear his throbbing head. *I'm in a back alley in Tokyo with no memory of how I got here.*

But he did remember Mariko's final word. He was not worthy. *She was right,* he thought. *I have no discipline. No control. I don't even have the strength to get up off this filthy ground.*

Then he heard a voice. "What have we here, my brothers?"

Three young hoods stood there, looking down at him menacingly.

"I...I don't want any trouble," said Wolverine.

"But we do," they answered.

In the grim light the X-Man could see they carried weapons. He was helpless. One of the three lifted a baseball bat above his head. He was about to swing it at Wolverine when—*whizz, whizz, whizz*—the sound of knives flying through the air broke the ominous silence. The hoods fled. Wolverine was untouched.

A woman appeared from out of the darkness and lifted him off the ground. She was strong. *Good thing,* Logan thought to himself. *'Cause if she dropped me, I'd fall like a heap of clay.*

The woman sighed. "You've seen better days, darling. But your luck's about to change. Because you're mine, Wolverine."

Who was she? How did she know his name? Wolverine fought to stay awake. To figure things out. But sleep won out. His eyes closed.

CHAPTER 5

Ninjas and Saviors

He woke to a shout. "Wolverine!" It was the woman. She had taken him to an apartment. Everything looked blurry. He was still hurting.

"Wolverine!"

Slowly, things came into focus.

Ninja assassins—a whole lot of them—were staring down at him. Their swords were unsheathed. Their intent was obvious. He took action.

Wolverine and the ninjas started fighting. The room was small. Wolverine went crashing

through a window and onto the narrow ledge outside. The ninjas followed. Wolverine landed on his feet. The others weren't so lucky. They'd no longer be a problem to him.

Trouble was, they hadn't come alone.

There was a whole *army* of ninjas on the surrounding rooftops. Logan scrambled back inside the apartment.

"Cripes!" he said, scooping the woman into his arms. "You sure know how to pick enemies. Who are these guys?"

"They are called the Hand," she explained. "They are professional assassins."

"That I could have guessed," he said. "By the way, have we met?"

"I am Yukio, Logan-san." Her dark eyes were lit with excitement. "And you owe me your life."

"Well, hold on, darlin'. Here's where I return the favor."

She wrapped her arms around him and he jumped out the window. Arrows whizzed past, a couple of them grazing Wolverine on the arm. But none hard enough to do damage.

They hit the ground fighting. The Hand was good. But Wolverine was better. The ninjas didn't stand a chance.

"The mood I'm in, I could've taken them without my claws," Wolverine said to his mysterious benefactor. There was no response.

"Yukio?...Yukio?" He looked around.

She was pressed up against the side of the building, holding her arm. She'd been hurt, shot with an arrow. But she hadn't cried out. Wolverine liked that. He checked out her wound. She'd be okay.

Okay? he thought, getting his first real look at her. She was *more* than okay. Her face was exotically beautiful, surrounded by short-cropped, glossy black hair. She wore a tight-fitting black catsuit that showed off her lean, muscular body. It struck Wolverine as almost funny. Yukio was the exact opposite of Mariko. And right now, she couldn't look any better to him.

The sound of sirens filled the air. Cops. "Let's make ourselves scarce," said Wolverine as he gathered her up in his arms again.

"Besides, I have some questions for you, lady." He took off for his hotel.

Inside his room, Yukio took care of their wounds.

"Yours have just about disappeared," she said, puzzled, as she examined his arms.

"I heal fast," he explained.

"A useful talent for a warrior," said Yukio with a smile. She settled onto the couch.

Wolverine could tell she was getting ready to ask questions—about his healing factor, his reason for being in Japan, what have you. He wasn't ready for a heart-to-heart. And he needed some answers, too. So he cut to the chase.

"What's with the Hand, Yukio?"

"The Hand is my enemy," she began. "And so is their master. He is a crime lord of awesome power. His name is Katsuyori, and his goal is to take over Japan. I fear him," she said as she turned her back to him.

Wolverine put his hand on her shoulder. She was slender. But he could feel the muscles.

"Don't worry," he said. "So long as I'm here, you're safe."

She wheeled around, a blade in her hand. "I can defend myself," she said.

She was serious—and ready to strike. Wolverine caught her wrist. The blade had a familiar scent to it.

Then as suddenly as she'd turned on him, Yukio melted in his arms. *The lady can match me mood swing for mood swing,* thought Wolverine. She put her head on his chest and sighed.

"I'm a tigress, Logan. I'm skilled in the arts of war. And when it comes to love..."

She looked him in the eyes. There was something between them. No doubt about it. Wolverine closed his eyes to kiss her—and saw Mariko's face, not hers.

Mariko. She haunted every thought he had. Gently, Wolverine pushed Yukio away. He walked out onto the terrace.

He needed to rest.

CHAPTER 6

Drama and Despair

Wolverine slept for twenty-four hours straight. When he woke, Yukio was gone.

He'd just poured himself a cup of tea when she came back. She was shaken. Edgy. Something was up.

"I met with Katsuyori," she confessed. "I pleaded with him to leave me alone. It didn't work." She was on the verge of tears. "There's only one sure way to save myself. I must kill Katsuyori."

Kill?

"Darlin'," said Wolverine, "there *is* another way. I'll make the creep an offer he can't refuse. I'll convince him that staying on your case will prove a lot more trouble than it's worth."

Yukio didn't believe it. She told him Katsuyori was mean. Tough. That he didn't scare easy.

We'll see about that, thought Wolverine.

Yukio knew that Katsuyori would be at an old *kabuki* theater that afternoon. Wolverine knew all about *kabuki.* It was a traditional Japanese drama with singing, dancing, costumes. The works. He decided they'd pay Katsuyori a visit. A trip to the theater sounded harmless enough.

It turned out the "theater" was really an old castle outside of Tokyo, surrounded by a moat and crawling with guards.

"So much for harmless," said Wolverine.

The two dived into the moat. Quietly, they swam across and scaled the castle wall. Then—one, two, three—Wolverine knocked the guards unconscious. Yukio was unhappy.

She'd wanted them taken care of more *permanently*. Wolverine, however, didn't see the point.

"They didn't see us," said Wolverine. "They can't ID who zapped them."

"But they are enemies," Yukio argued. "They should be treated like enemies. Harshly."

Wolverine had to admit the woman had a killer's instinct. He liked it. She reminded him of himself.

There were more guards inside. Wolverine took them down as though they were amateurs. It all seemed almost too easy. Yukio signaled to him that she had to take care of something outside. Fine. He was used to working solo anyhow. And he needed to concentrate.

Katsuyori must have an ace in the hole, thought Wolverine as he crawled along a beam above the theater. There had to be a trap here no one would spot until it was too late.

And then he heard voices. Wolverine looked down into the audience and froze. The

theater was empty except for three people standing in the aisle. His heart did a drum roll inside his chest. It was Mariko and her husband, Noburu. And a second man, whom he imagined must be the crime lord, Katsuyori.

Katsuyori bowed. "I trust you will find this setting right for our meeting," he said. "Please be seated. The play is about to begin."

Meeting? thought Wolverine. Noburu was involved with the crime lord? But what was Mariko doing there? And then it all made sense to him. *Mariko was insurance!* Noburu figured Katsuyori wouldn't try anything funny with Shingen's daughter around. But Wolverine wasn't so sure. He leaned closer to the action.

"Must we wait?" Noburu hissed.

Katsuyori looked annoyed. "Later. After the play we will talk business. I am surprised Shingen sent someone so lacking in social graces."

So Shingen was involved! Up to his eyeballs, was Wolverine's bet.

The play began. A classic. Wolverine recog-

nized it. The story of samurai warriors, loyal to their master—even though it meant certain death. Actors in whiteface, wearing traditional costumes, leapt on stage.

Then it was time for the big scene. The high point of the show. The lead actor drew his *katana*, his sword. The sharp steel gleamed—it was no fake stage weapon.

Suddenly the pieces fell into place. Shingen. Katsuyori. Wolverine didn't know the whole story. But Mariko was going to pay the price. *She* was the ace in the hole! The playacting was over. This samurai was for real—and he was aiming his sword at Mariko!

The samurai leapt off the stage. Wolverine met him in midair. But the guy was a pro. He didn't miss a beat. He just changed targets. From Mariko to Wolverine. Stage lights flashed on his sword. And on Wolverine's claws.

The warrior fell, close to Mariko. She gasped and drew back.

Katsuyori knocked Noburu unconscious and took off for his car. The X-Man wanted to follow him, but there was a whole troupe of

samurai actors on stage—and each one wanted the lead role. Opposite him.

"If you wish Mariko-chan's life, you'll have to take mine first," said Wolverine.

"Then, *gaijin,*" said a samurai as he leapt toward him, "we shall!"

"It's your funeral, bub."

The show didn't last long. When Logan thought of Mariko at their mercy, he went crazy. The battle was over in minutes. Wolverine was the only one left standing.

The samurai warriors were lucky, though. For the most part they were still breathing. Katsuyori wasn't. Yukio had wired his car. When he opened the door, the car exploded into a million pieces, taking him with it.

Wolverine didn't know how he felt. He'd lost control. *Again.* But he'd won the battle. Then he saw Mariko's face.

Her eyes were wide with horror. Revulsion.

He felt like he had been kicked in the guts.

Neither of them said a word. She turned her back on him. Whatever they had, whatever they might have had, he knew it was finished.

CHAPTER 7

Pain and Heartache

Wolverine tried to forget about Mariko.

Yukio was there to help.

They'd stay out late. Go to places he'd never have taken Mariko. Joints with loud music and even louder customers. And he'd get into fights. The physical pain eased the heartache. But with his healing factor, the pain didn't last for long. So he'd have to find another fight. Another brawl.

One night, the two found their way to the back room of a deserted building. There was a

guy there Wolverine wanted to meet. A sumo wrestler. He could've been a champion, but he'd been kicked out of competition for fighting dirty. When the sumo tried to pull a fast one on Wolverine, he got mad. And when this ol' boy got mad, he wasn't very nice.

The sumo wrestler went down like a sack of potatoes.

And all the while, Yukio cheered from her seat. Front row center. She liked a good fight as much as he did.

But it was over now. Wolverine had to find diversion somewhere else. "Time to go, darlin'," he said, taking Yukio's hand.

Asano was waiting outside. If Logan cared, he would have been surprised.

Wolverine hadn't seen Asano since the evening he'd picked him up at the airport. He looked exactly the same. Suit, glasses, serious expression. He stuck out like a sore thumb in that lowlife neighborhood.

"What's doing, compadre?" said Wolverine, cheerfully enough. Considering.

"Logan, I ask your help," said Asano.

"Someone has taken over the entire Japanese underworld. And now he means to seize control of the country itself."

"What's it to me?"

"My government wants the plot smashed." Asano put his hand on Wolverine's shoulder to keep him from leaving. "I cannot do the job alone. I need you, Logan..." He paused. "As a friend."

"I need you too!" Yukio laughed, pulling Wolverine away. For a moment, he was torn. It was tough to forget everything he and Asano had been through. But that's what he was trying to do. Forget everything.

"Your hand, Asano," he said. "Move it or lose it."

Yukio led Wolverine away. He let her. He was tired. Numb. He followed, no questions asked. They wound up in the middle of nowhere. A deserted train yard.

Logan was so exhausted, he could barely see. Barely stand. He and Yukio fell onto the tracks. They held each other tightly. Yukio

kissed Wolverine. But his head was fuzzy. He couldn't kiss her back.

"This is my secret place," she told him. "You are the first I've brought here."

"Yeah? So what do we do now?" he mumbled.

"We wait for the final moment, Logan. Then we go."

Wait for what? said Wolverine to himself.

And then, all at once, felt a vibration. Heard a rumbling sound.

He moved. Fast. Taking Yukio with him. The train whizzed past, missing them by an inch as they rolled away.

"Are you crazy?" he shouted. *"Playing chicken with a 200-mile-an-hour bullet train!"*

Yukio grinned. "I am living every moment to the fullest!"

That made no sense to Wolverine. It seemed to him that the lady had a death wish. But he was too tired to argue.

His eyes closed. "Whether you admit it or not, my love, you are the same as I," Yukio said. "Sleep, Logan-san. I will protect you."

He slept. Right there in the train yard. He dreamed of Mariko and of battles for duty and honor.

And then, in his dream, Wolverine heard shouts. Grunts. Bodies falling to the ground. A woman shaking him.

"Logan, wake up. We're in trouble!"

"Mariko?" he called out, opening his eyes. But it had been Yukio.

She looked him in the eyes, stood up, and gave him a good swift kick on the chin.

He was knocked out cold. Again.

CHAPTER 8

Hunter and Hunted

Wolverine woke up with a headache. Not a good sign. His healing factor had been working overtime for weeks now. Where was he? Oh, yeah. The train yard. He started to get up, and then he noticed them. The Hand again. Ninjas. Knocked out. Dying. All over the train yard. They were no threat to him now. Must've been Yukio's work.

What had they wanted? Their interest in Yukio should have ended when Katsuyori died. Why were they still after her?

Wolverine hurried back to his hotel in search of Yukio. He had some apologizing to do.

The door to the room was open. It was dark inside. Wolverine sensed danger. Death. He couldn't see the body. But he could smell it. Asano.

His friend.

Wolverine crept close to where the body lay. His hand closed over something. One of Yukio's blades. Memories came flooding back. Yukio putting the bomb in Katsuyori's car. Wanting to kill the guards.

He tried to make excuses for her. That Asano must have wandered in and frightened her. That he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. That Yukio was confused. And then he got a whiff of the blade.

The scent was so familiar. *Where do I know this from?* he wondered. And then it hit him. The poisoned *shuriken*. The poison was the same stuff as on this blade.

It was Yukio who first nailed him! She was working for Shingen. *He was the crime lord.*

So that's how Yukio knew who I was, Wolverine realized. With everything going on, he'd never quizzed her on that piece of the puzzle. Not that it mattered. She would have lied, just the way she lied about everything. She set him up.

And she was still in the room.

"Logan?" she said in a trembling voice. He was afraid she might try to explain. But there was no explanation worth listening to.

"You'd better kill me now," he told her. "You won't get a second chance."

She made a small noise. A sob? A laugh? Wolverine wasn't sure. Then she flung herself out the open window, landing on her feet on the rooftop below. Wolverine jumped out after her. From rooftop to rooftop, they played cat and mouse. Only this time, Wolverine was the cat.

Yukio was fast. Sure-footed. But Wolverine was on the prowl. And as he trailed her, more pieces of the puzzle fell into place. Yukio had used him to help her kill Katsuyori, giving Shingen full control of the underworld. Only

Asano stood in Shingen's way. So Yukio killed him. Killed his friend.

He would avenge Asano's death.

Yukio took a wrong step and went crashing through the ceiling of a glass-roofed Zen garden. A blizzard of broken glass fell around her as she tumbled to the ground.

She was just getting back on her feet when Wolverine's voice stopped her.

"Race is over, darlin'," he said from above. He swung down inside the garden. They stood face to face.

"Am I to die then, Logan-san?" she said calmly.

"After what you've done?" He clenched his fists. "You have to ask?"

Snikt!

Yukio didn't move. "I love you. As you love me," she said. "We are soulmates. Kill me, and you kill yourself."

She was right. They *were* connected. Two of a kind. But he'd never liked himself much.

"Perhaps, darlin', that's what we both deserve."

Wolverine raised his claws to strike—and an arrow sliced through the air. The Hand was back!

"Seize him!" their leader cried. Ropes came flying at Wolverine from all directions. Winding around his hands and legs. He was caught. "Hold him fast."

Had this been another trap?

Wolverine looked at Yukio. Her face told him the truth. No. She was scared. Frightened for him. She should have known better.

Quickly, Wolverine twisted his body. The ropes snapped. Next order of business: the ninjas. There must've been a dozen of them. They should have gone down like a house of cards. But Wolverine was out of practice. It took all his concentration. And when it was over, Yukio was gone. Two ninjas lay lifeless—Yukio's blades in their sides.

Was she trying to save me—or herself? thought Wolverine. And what about the assassins by the railroad tracks? Yukio had taken care of them for him. That couldn't have been part of the plan. Could it? He had so many

questions, so few answers.

Wolverine looked around. He was in a private garden. It had once been a place of peace. Beauty. Now it was wrecked. Like an animal—a wolverine, perhaps—had torn through it. The peace had turned to chaos. The story of his life.

The garden could be rebuilt. Could his life?

He sat down on a rock and traced his finger through the garden sand. He thought about Yukio and Mariko. And what they meant to him.

Yukio loves me the way I am. Wild. But Mariko…she makes me want to change. To grow. In a way, I love them both. And I failed them both. Worse, I failed myself. Because I lost myself.

Wolverine smoothed the sand as best he could, and rearranged the rocks.

Peace *could* be restored. He would have to try. A man tries. He changes and he grows. An animal does not. It was time to set things right.

"I am a man, Shingen. Not a beast. Not a thing. Calling me one was a mistake. That mistake is going to cost you!"

CHAPTER 9

Crime and Punishment

He found his Wolverine suit balled up in the corner of his hotel room. It had been a while since he'd worn it. But he was ready. He slipped it on.

It felt good. *Wolverine* felt good. Clear head. Instincts primed. He took to the streets.

He was on a mission. A personal mission to clean up Tokyo. Shingen ran his criminal operation in back alleys. Abandoned warehouses. Deserted streets. If you knew where to look, it was easy to spot his flunkies. Hoods holding

up unlucky passersby. Goons roughing up other goons. Money changing hands. Money that was winding its way to the crime lord, Shingen.

That's going to change, thought Wolverine as he roamed the city, eyeballing everyone he passed.

There! In the park. Two of Shingen's men were exchanging suitcases.

"Evenin', gentlemen," said Wolverine, pushing his way between them. "Pardon me." *Snikt!* Wolverine slashed the suitcases. Money came tumbling out—torn to shreds.

He waited for them to try something. But they weren't that crazy. They started to run.

"I've got a message for your boss," Logan called after them. "Tell Lord Shingen that Wolverine is coming for him!"

The X-Man hit the sidewalk and went back to work. There were plenty of other fish to fry.

Shingen had spent years building his evil empire. It took Wolverine just hours to break it.

And each time he left the same message for Lord Shingen: "Tell him that Wolverine is

coming for him."

By nightfall, the streets were quiet. Logan had laid the groundwork. He'd taken care of the hired hands. Now it was time for the master.

Wolverine approached the Yashida ancestral home in silence. Darkness covered him like a second skin. The guards never saw him coming. Or knew what happened.

Seconds later, he was inside.

He sniffed the air. Shingen wasn't alone.

Without making a sound, he padded down the hall, stopping outside a doorway. A glance inside confirmed what he already knew. Yukio, Shingen, Mariko, and Noburu were all inside. Yukio lying on the floor, Shingen was standing above her, his foot on her neck. Mariko was pleading with him to be merciful. Noburu was pulling her away.

"Face Wolverine if you wish, Shingen," Noburu was saying. "I prefer to live. Come with me, wife." He dragged Mariko toward the door.

"No!" she cried.

"I'm in no mood to argue." Noburu pulled her harder.

"You heard the lady, bub," said Wolverine, stepping into the shadowed corner of the room. "She wants to stay."

Noburu pulled out a gun and held it to Mariko's head. "One false move, Wolverine, and the lady dies. Now step into the light where I can see you!"

Logan stepped into the light. He couldn't let Mariko be hurt.

"*Fool!*" shrieked Noburu. He aimed his gun at Wolverine and fired. Wolverine fell to the ground, hit in the shoulder.

A whizzing cut through the air, followed by a *thunk*, *thunk*, *thunk*. Yukio's blades. "Gotcha!" she said. As usual, her aim was perfect. Noburu would abuse Mariko no longer.

In an instant, Yukio was standing over Mariko, another blade poised and ready. She lifted her arm. and—*rrrip!*—slashed at her bodice. Logan's heart stopped.

"Don't worry," said Yukio, kneeling beside

him with a piece of kimono fabric. "I didn't cut your precious Mariko—just her outfit."

Yukio used the cloth to make a bandage. "I'd like to stay," she said. "To fight by your side."

Wolverine smiled, and his doubts about Yukio washed away. But there were some things he had to do alone.

"You can't," he told her.

For just one moment, her lips were on his. Then she was gone.

Mariko knew what would happen next. She left the room, unable to watch.

Shingen went to the ancient swords hanging on the wall. Wolverine followed.

They were like actors in a *kabuki* drama. Each knew their role.

Shingen lifted a steel sword from its place. He had said Wolverine wasn't worthy to use one.

"Shingen," said Logan. "Am I worthy now?"

"That remains to be seen," said Shingen as he unsheathed the deadly weapon.

CHAPTER 10

Duty and Honor

Shingen moved forward. Wolverine stepped back. *So this is how it is to be,* thought Logan. *Shingen's sword versus my claws.* The old versus the new.

Blades. Claws. Hissing as they sliced through the air. They passed each other, circling. Wolverine made contact. A cut. Shingen reacted with a thrust and parry. His cut went deeper.

The battle continued. Blows given. Blows taken. It was a fierce, mortal combat. But it

had to end. And it did—with Shingen, unmoving, on the floor.

A door slid open. There, silhouetted by light, stood Mariko. "Logan?" she said. "Father?"

When she saw the figure on the ground, her hand flew to her mouth.

Wolverine said nothing. She was the woman he loved. And he had slain her father. Honor and duty demanded she become his enemy.

Mariko knelt by her father. Slowly she reached for the ancient sword by his side. Her hand trembled. Even wounded, exhausted from his battle, Wolverine could easily have taken it from her.

Logan did nothing. Mariko came toward him. Her hands had stopped shaking. His fate was about to be sealed.

Mariko raised the sword with a strong, firm grip.

"Do you remember this blade, Logan?" she asked. "The honor sword of the Yashida clan?" She paused a moment. "This sword represents

all we have been and all we wish to be. It is perfection of form and spirit. And it is to be worn not by the lord of the clan, but by the samurai who best demonstrates these qualities.

"My father brought shame to the Yashida clan. He was evil. He had no right use this sword."

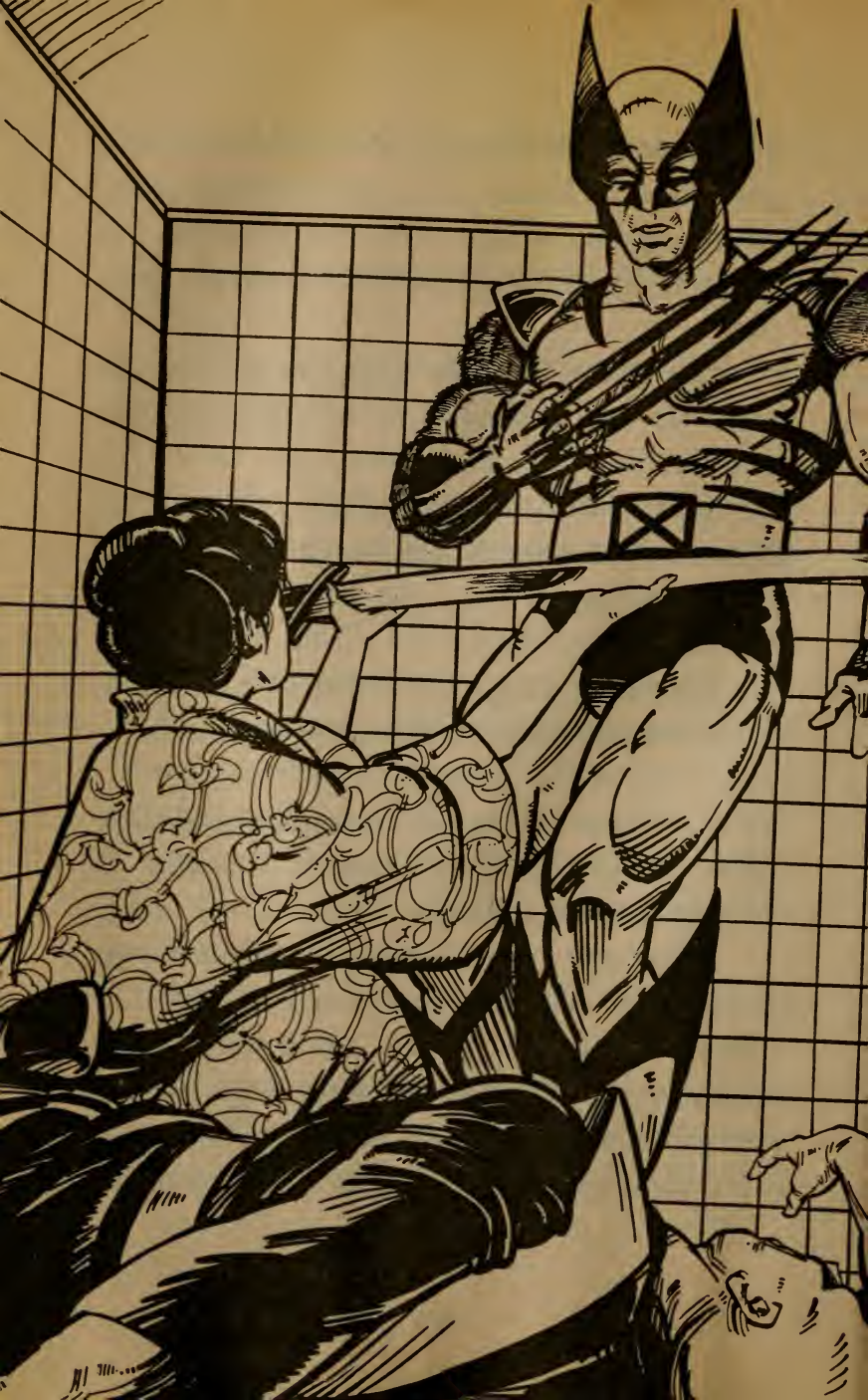
Mariko held out the blade. "Logan. The honor sword is yours. You fought for the good of others, Logan. For right. For truth. You are honorable."

Wolverine took the sword in one hand. With the other, he held Mariko close.

Later, Mariko told Logan that she would have killed her father if he hadn't. She had to reclaim her family honor.

Wolverine was impressed. Mariko was tough. Not someone you would want for an enemy. But Wolverine was afraid that Mariko *did* have enemies. Serious ones, who wanted her father's criminal connections.

But for the time being, Logan put his

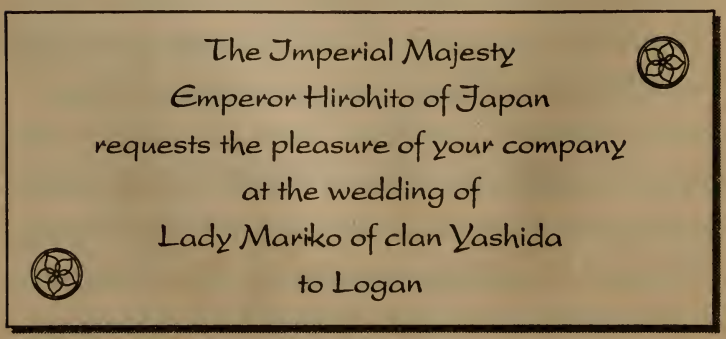


worries on hold. He and Mariko were finally together. They were staying in the Yashida ancestral home. And as they walked around the grounds they talked about all that had happened. All they *hoped* would happen.

Wolverine was more in love than ever.

One day, he stopped Mariko in the garden. He asked her to marry him.

Wedding invitations went out a few days later. Wolverine wished he could've seen the X-Men's faces when they opened the envelope!


The Imperial Majesty
Emperor Hirohito of Japan
requests the pleasure of your company
at the wedding of
Lady Mariko of clan Yashida
to Logan

Wolverine never thought he was the marrying kind. Then again, he never thought someone like Mariko would fall for a guy like him. *That's life,* he said to himself. *You never know what will happen next.*

CHAPTER 11

Ceremonies and Samurai

Wolverine wanted his friends beside him at his wedding. And the X-Men were glad to come.

"Welcome to Japan," he said with a little bow as Nightcrawler—or "elf," as Wolverine called him because of his pointed ears—Storm, Colossus, and Rogue came off the plane. The rest of the team would arrive in the morning.

Nightcrawler gripped Logan's shoulder. "Are you well, my friend?" he asked.

"There were moments, elf," he admitted.

Then Nightcrawler noticed Wolverine's

outfit. The traditional robe he wore was a bit of a change from his usual jeans and jacket or Wolverine suit! "I like it," said Nightcrawler. "You look very nearly civilized."

"I do my humble best, pal," said Wolverine, leading the gang through the airport.

Back at Mariko's house, Logan played lord of the manor. "Make yourselves comfortable, people. There are beds if you want to crash."

It had been a long flight from New York. Everyone left for bed except for Storm and Nightcrawler. The blue mutant had already fallen asleep on a couch! Storm and Wolverine settled in for a talk.

"You're different, my friend," said Storm.

Wolverine nodded. "That's for sure. Whatever road I thought my life would take, I didn't count on it leading here. Look at me—a roughneck Canadian mountain man. And I'm about to marry the daughter of the most powerful family in Japan." Logan sank back into his chair. "I still don't believe it's happening. It's like a dream."

"Why?"

"Because part of me doesn't think it's right. Shingen asked me once if I was worthy. I still have doubts about the answer."

He'd lost control, lost all sense of discipline, too many times.

"But if Mariko accepts you," asked Storm, "what else matters?" The two sat for a while in silence, and then Storm left to get some rest.

Logan was alone with his thoughts. But for once, they were peaceful. He knew Storm was right. Mariko understood. And nothing else mattered.

And then he heard a noise. Metal against flesh. A fighting kick. It was coming from the roof next door. Something was going on.

Wolverine nudged Nightcrawler awake. He kept his Wolverine uniform on underneath, just in case. "Transport me to the next roof over, elf. There's a fight going on."

Bamf! In an instant, they were there.

Two people were going head to head. One was dressed completely in silver armor. "I am the Silver Samurai," he announced. "To attack me is death!"

His opponent was a slim lady in black. *Yukio.*

"My armor can outlast your strongest blows. And my energy blade can cut through anything!" The Silver Samurai brought down his sword, missing Yukio by a hair.

"What'd I tell you?" Logan whispered to Nightcrawler. "Grab the lady, elf. Make sure she's safe. "The bruiser's mine!"

Wolverine leaped into the fray. "Logan-san!" cried Yukio.

"Fancy meeting you here, darlin'," he said, giving the samurai a whack. "How about an explanation?"

While Logan fought, Yukio talked. Seemed the Silver Samurai was a relative of Mariko's who wanted Shingen's underworld connections for himself, and Mariko out of the picture.

Wolverine couldn't help but smile as he sent the Samurai spinning. Yukio was watching out for Mariko. The lady really had class. But this was no time for sentiment. What he needed now were answers.

"Who's in this with you?" said Wolverine.

"I'll give you the response you deserve," answered the samurai, recovering the advantage and forcing Logan toward the edge of the roof. "A coward's death." He pushed Logan over and—*poof!*—disappeared.

Wolverine fell face first. Not far, though—Nightcrawler *bamf*ed him back to the roof.

It was empty. "Logan, the woman! She's gone!" said Nightcrawler.

Wolverine owed Yukio his thanks. But it wasn't her custom to stick around for any testimonial.

"That's her style, pal," he said. "Come on, elf. Let's call it a night."

First things first, though, thought Wolverine. He wanted to tuck Mariko in and make sure she was okay. But he was in for a nasty shock. Mariko was gone.

"Mariko?" he called, over and over. His voice sounded strange. Scared. And that's how he felt. They'd come so far. If anything happened to her now...

Logan sniffed the air and picked up two scents—Mariko's. And the Silver Samurai's. He took off like a bullet.

They were up ahead. Still on the grounds.

"The clan is mine by right," the samurai was saying. "By birthright." He held Mariko in a viselike grip.

"You are a criminal, like my father. You have dishonored our name. Forfeited your heritage. Your claim is denied!" Mariko spat back.

"Let the lady go," said Wolverine. "If you have a problem, you can deal with me about it."

Snikt! Two sets of adamantium claws versus one energy sword. The outcome was never in doubt. The Silver Samurai was asking to be dead meat.

"Logan-san, no!" Mariko cried out, stopping Wolverine cold. "Enough blood has been spilled. Let this be the end of it. Grant my relative his life."

Wolverine listened. He had grown enough to see the truth in her words.

They left the Silver Samurai to lick his wounds, and slowly walked back to the house. "Let's just both get some sleep," he said, kissing her good night. "We have a wedding to go to tomorrow!"

Logan woke early. By nightfall he would be married. It should have been the happiest day of his life. But he couldn't shake an uneasy feeling. The air seemed supercharged—the way it gets just before a storm.

He dressed in traditional Japanese wedding costume. He was ready—and so was everyone else. The rest of the X-Men—Professor Xavier and the others—had flown in that morning.

He and Mariko were to be married in a nearby temple. Besides the X-Men, the place was filled with people from Japan's most powerful families.

In the Japanese tradition, Mariko wore a robe, and under the robe, a white kimono. The white was for mourning. It was a symbol of her leaving her parents' family to join herself forever to her husband and his.

Logan watched her walk, with bowed head, down the aisle toward the altar. Then he followed.

Suddenly Mariko stopped walking. *What is she doing?* Wolverine wondered. *I don't remember this from the dress rehearsal.*

She held out her arm to silence the murmurs. "Stop the ceremony!" she ordered.

Wolverine's head snapped up. Nothing registered. No emotion. No anger. He was frozen to the spot. It was like he was watching a dream. A bad dream. Finally, he forced himself to speak. "Why?" he said.

Mariko's voice was as cold as ice. Her face was expressionless. *"Because you are not worthy,"* she said, and she strode away, without looking back.

Logan stood there in silence. Finally the emotions—shock, anger, sadness—came flooding in. But he still couldn't move—not even to wipe the tear that rolled down his cheek.

CHAPTER 12

Right and Wrong

Nightcrawler and Storm took Wolverine to a hotel. Strangely enough, it was the same one he had stayed at when he first came to Japan to find Mariko. And now, after all he had been through, he still didn't have her.

Storm tried to get Wolverine to talk, but he wouldn't. After all, he had opened up before. To Mariko. And the only thing he had gotten was pain. Enough was enough.

The next day Wolverine put on his costume. If this was how Mariko thought of

him—as an unworthy beast—then that was how he'd look. He went back to the Yashida home, determined to get some things off his chest. He couldn't deny that he was hoping Mariko would be back to normal. That she would tell him she loved him again.

But his hopes were dashed when he walked through the door. Mariko wasn't alone. She was with the Silver Samurai.

"You won the battle on the roof, Wolverine. But I have won the war," said the samurai. "Mariko has forgiven me. I am in the family once again. And you are nothing."

The samurai wasn't responsible for Mariko's change of heart. Wolverine knew that much—he didn't have the power. Mariko always made up her own mind. Logan turned to her. To his beloved. She stared back—and he felt her disgust like a slap in the face.

Wolverine knew what he had to do.

"If I'm not worthy of you, lady," he growled, "I'm not worthy of this, either."

He flung the honor sword at her feet.

"You are right," she said. "My love would

be for a man. Not a beast in human form."

Her words cut worse than any knife. "You got it, lady," he said. And Wolverine left Mariko, and Japan, for what he thought would be forever.

Wolverine was home. But he may as well have been in no man's land. He didn't want to do anything or see anyone. It was hard to even get out of bed in the morning.

But then he got a piece of news—so big, so important, it shook the stupor right out of him.

The evil mutant Mastermind had apparently been hard at work on a new project. The object of his labor? Lady Mariko Yashida.

Mastermind had, it seemed, used his mind-control powers to change Mariko's mindset. He was manipulating her like a puppet, forcing her to use her father's underworld connections to his own vile advantage.

Wolverine was on the warpath. This state of affairs would not last.

He and the X-Men did their thing. Mastermind was crushed like a bug. He should have

known better than to mess with the old Canucklehead.

Still, Wolverine couldn't let himself feel too good about the outcome. He knew Mariko was free from Mastermind's spell. But who was to say how she felt about him? Weeks passed and she didn't call. She didn't write. Nothing.

Maybe he was still unworthy.

And then one day Wolverine got a package from overseas. It was delivered by imperial messenger—*Japanese* imperial messenger. He ripped off the paper.

It was the honor sword of the Yashida clan.

Logan was on the next flight to Tokyo. He had some questions for Miss Yashida.

She was alone when he arrived. "Why did you send this back to me?" he demanded.

"It is yours by right," Mariko answered.

"If that's true, then you're mine as well."

Mariko put her hand on his arm. "No, Logan. I am not. I love you and nothing in life would make me happier than to become your wife. But this cannot be.

"Mastermind forced me to strengthen my family ties to the criminal underworld. Clan Yashida is more dishonored than ever. It is my duty to break those ties. And I must do it before we marry. I must do it alone."

What could he say? She wasn't budging. And besides, he understood. Duty. Honor. No matter how much it hurt, they had to come before love. If they didn't, their love wasn't worth anything.

Wolverine took the honor sword back.

"Good-bye, Mariko," he said quietly.

"Farewell, beloved," she said, weeping. "You have risked all to prove yourself worthy of me. It is only fitting that I do the same."

Wolverine left Mariko. But he knew he'd be back. That someday they'd be together. When Mariko had accomplished what she set out to do.

He had faced Shingen, the Hand's ninjas, the Silver Samurai, and his own fears. But now came the hardest part.

The waiting.

CHAPTER 13

Love and Loss

Wolverine got on with his life. Or tried to, at least. It wasn't easy, with him in New York and Mariko in Japan. Thousands of miles of land and sea between them.

He hung the honor sword above his bed. And kept pictures of Mariko on his nightstand. Every once in a while, she'd send a new one. Logan noticed changes in her appearance. Her hair came down; it was in a Western hairstyle now. Soon she was wearing Western clothes, too. But Wolverine knew in his heart that

Mariko was still the same sweet, determined lady.

He missed her.

"I should be a samurai," he said one night to Mariko's picture. "But I love you, M'iko. How can any warrior survive when he's cut out his heart? And yet—how can I not, in honor, respect your wishes?"

Suddenly, he was overcome with anger. Wolverine wouldn't sit around waiting for a woman. He'd take what he wanted and not let honor or duty stand in his way.

But logic told him he was not only Wolverine. He was Logan, too. A man who respected Mariko for standing by just those things.

And that's how time went by. Mariko working hard to dissolve her family's underworld connections. Wolverine working hard to let her do it on her own.

Until Mariko let it slip that she was in real trouble with a new crime lord, Matsuo. He wanted the Yashida clan connections, and would stop at nothing to get them. Wolverine knew him from the States. And a nastier guy

he'd never met.

He left for Japan immediately.

Hidden in shadow, Wolverine stood on the grounds outside the Yashida home. There was a full moon, lighting the place like a Hollywood set. Good thing, he thought to himself. He was able to see the dozens of the Hand's ninjas poised to attack the house.

They were Matsuo's men now, and they meant business.

But so did Mariko. She stepped outside, holding a sword by her side.

"Mariko, no!" Wolverine called as he made his way across the lawn and to her side. She was, naturally, surprised to see him. But there was no time for small talk. The ninjas were advancing. Wolverine took the first group down. But reinforcements kept coming.

Mariko didn't shy away. She had learned to handle a sword. She was good. It was in her blood.

Still, there were too many ninjas for them to handle on their own. "Fall back, inside the

mansion," she said.

Wolverine hesitated. Wouldn't they be trapped inside?

"A Yashida can't be trapped in a house built by Shingen!" laughed Mariko.

She was right. Shingen had been master of many a fiendish weapon. But his house was the deadliest.

They slipped inside and raced through the mazelike halls, the Hand in hot pursuit. Mariko and Logan came through unscathed, landing in a guarded room in the center of the fortress. The ninjas weren't so lucky. There were razors in the walls. Trapdoors. The ninjas couldn't navigate the way. For the time being, Matsuo was stopped.

"Excuse me," Mariko said to the guards. "Logan and I have private matters to discuss." She led Wolverine into the next room, the chapel. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the Silver Samurai leave the room. Wolverine knew that the samurai and Mariko had made an uneasy truce. That he was fighting on her side now. It was just another sign of her

strength.

But Wolverine couldn't think about that now. After all this time, Mariko and he were alone.

She knelt down in front of the altar, her back to him.

"Have you returned to shame me?" she asked. Wolverine could hear her sigh. "After all this time, I have failed to rid the Yashida clan of our underworld connections. It is so complicated. There are so many families and I am responsible for their well being. What will become of them? They will be ruined!"

Logan wanted to hold her. To tell her he didn't come to shame her—only to help her. But he didn't get the chance. His supersharp hearing picked up a noise on the roof.

He had a feeling, a bad feeling, that one way or the other, their fate would be decided. Tonight.

Without saying a word, he led Mariko back to the other room. The guards—and the Silver Samurai—would watch out for her. He had business on the roof. Although with the way

things were looking, he'd be keeping his eyes and ears on Mariko too. Just in case.

Wolverine scaled the wall and—*snikt!*—slashed through the ceiling. Five ninjas. *This shouldn't take long,* he thought as he went into action. And while he fought, he listened to the voices below.

"The sensors have been triggered," a guard was telling Mariko. "A single intruder has entered the mansion. Someone small. A girl."

One small girl? The maze would take care of her, figured Wolverine. No need to be alarmed.

One ninja down. Four to go.

He heard the tap-tap-tap of a cane. Mariko's gasp.

"*This* is the intruder?" said the Silver Samurai. "A blind girl?"

"Only someone who is blind could be successful," answered Mariko. "Her other senses are so highly developed that she avoided all the traps."

"I am Reiko," said the girl. "I am a free agent, here to speak for Matsuo. He offers to

buy out your underworld connections. Then he will dissolve them. This way, you will not profit from crime."

"That is generous," Mariko said slowly. "The clan would not be ruined. What does Matsuo want in return?"

"You must show your good faith in the manner of the *yakuza*, the underworld. Matsuo wants one of your fingers."

One of her fingers! Three ninjas left Wolverine had to hurry.

The girl held out a sharp knife.

The Silver Samurai seized the blade. "Is this the knife Matsuo offers for the cutting? How do we know it isn't poisoned? Does Matsuo take us for fools?"

Quick as a flash, the girl grabbed it back and stabbed herself in the foot. "Would I do this with sullied steel?" she asked calmly.

"Now it is your turn," she said to Mariko, holding out the knife.

"Wait a minute!" Wolverine shouted from the roof. "Don't do anything!" But the noise of fighting drowned out his cries. Three ninjas

down. Two to go.

Mariko took the knife. "It is time," she said, "for Mariko Yashida to make things right for all those who have put their trust in her."

One ninja to go. Wolverine lashed out with everything he had.

And then there were none.

Wolverine dropped through the hole in the ceiling as Mariko dropped the knife. It was too late. She'd drawn blood. It was just a scratch. But it was enough.

"*Aieeee!*" she screamed. "It burns like white fire running up my veins!"

"Blowfish toxin!" said the samurai. "The girl must be immune to the poison!"

Mariko fell. Wolverine caught her in his arms.

"Logan, my beloved," she whispered. "Take me into the chapel." Wolverine glanced at the samurai, who held the blind girl fast.

Why wasn't anybody doing anything?

"Let's get you to the hospital, darlin'," said Wolverine. "We'll get the antidote."

"There is no antidote. Please..." she whis-

pered. "The chapel. It is a horrible death. It should not be in public."

Wolverine did what she asked.

Inside the chapel, he cradled her in his arms. But he could not stop the pain.

"Oh, Logan, I must ask something of you. I have fulfilled my vow. The Yashida clan is cleansed. I would have been free to marry you."

"Darlin'," he choked. He wanted to tell her to hush. To save her breath. But she needed to speak.

"We are married in our hearts," she said. "We carry our wedding vows in our souls. Always."

"What are you asking me, darlin'?"

"I'm asking you to spare me the final pain. Release my soul while it sings with my love for you...

"Use your claws, my beloved."

Wolverine's guts were wrenched tight. *"No! I can't!"* he shouted.

Her hand tightened on his. He felt her love. Her pain.

For the first time in his life, Wolverine's claws wouldn't snap out. He forced them out. It took all his strength. But he did it. He could never refuse his M'iko.

Snikt.

That was it. Wolverine sat in the freezing woods. He still saw Mariko's face in the campfire. Twisted with pain. Agony. But suddenly, it was still. Calm. She was at peace. She had done what she had to do. So had he.

Wolverine sighed, and his breath formed a cloud. *It's over,* he said to himself. *I've found a peace—of sorts—myself. Mariko was right. Our souls are connected. She will always be with me.*

And the love he carried for her? It would last forever. Guiding him in honor. Duty. He smiled to himself. It felt good.

In the morning, he'd start back for the X-Mansion. Logan was going home.

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